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ORAL ENGLISH IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

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A small boy is said to have defined "elocution" as something they kill folks with in the United States. In a discussion of oral English it may be well for us to bear in mind that this part of the English work is not "elocution." Neither can it stand off by itself like a sore thumb. It must be correlated with the work in written composition and in literature.

My purpose is to explain what we are doing at the Baltimore City College to meet the needs of our boys in oral expression; to solve the very difficult problem of how to make classroom English the English of the baseball field and of the street. The method which I shall try to explain is the result of three years of experimentation and study. We feel that we have worked out a plan which, while imperfect in many ways and calling for constant revisions and modifications, is nevertheless doing our boys much good.

Our plan is designed, in a general way, to do the following things: first, to purify language, by correcting idioms, by removing slang, and by enlarging and enriching the vocabulary; second, to make language effective by constant attention to correct grammatical usage and rhetorical structure in the sentence, the paragraph, and the whole composition; third, to make expression effective by drilling in distinct enunciation, correct pronunciation, and by freeing the voice and body from mannerisms and constrictions; fourth, to vitalize the subject of English, to stimulate thought, and to make the subject practical while retaining the cultural and aesthetic values.

With these general considerations before us, let us try to answer the two leading questions which naturally arise: What does our plan include? and How do we teach it?

In the first place, it includes much practice in reading aloud.

Ruskin said, "If I could have a son or daughter possessed with but one accomplishment in life, it should be that of good reading." Also, Longfellow says, "Of equal honor with him who *writes* a grand poem is he who *reads* it grandly." Again, Carlyle says, "We are all poets when we read a poem *well*." These quotations, imply a high ideal of what is considered good reading, but is it not an art worthy of our most careful cultivation? And it is not so impossible of attainment as it may seem at first sight—a few minutes of practice each day in class and at home, kept up for three or four years, will work wonders. Little technical knowledge of reading need be taught—constant insistence upon proper phrasing and pausing, and upon intensely thinking the thought, is often sufficient. The main requirement is concentration of thought, riveting the thinking process upon the meaning of the text. This may often be secured by asking a few simple questions. It is surprising how often the clear understanding of a word or phrase illuminates an entire passage for the young mind groping about in the darkness of some meaningless phrase, and causes the pupil to appreciate the meaning of the text and to realize the appropriate feeling or emotion. And here we are teaching both expression and literary appreciation.

In the second place, oral English includes practice in giving declamations. A short poem or prose gem, thoroughly memorized, may be made the basis of much interesting and helpful drilling in enunciation and in pronunciation, and in the many technical matters which help the pupil to realize the thought and to appreciate the spirit of the piece. Among the favorite declamations are the following: "Charge of the Light Brigade," "Lincoln's Gettysburg Address," "The Psalm of Life," "The Constitution," "Building of the Ship," "The Wreck of the Schooner *Hesperus*." Frequently we have parts taken from the literature texts, given as declamations or dialogues, and even as modest efforts at dramatizations. For instance, when studying *Silas Marner* the boys enter eagerly into the spirit of the Rainbow scene from the sixth chapter and dramatize it with spirit and evident enjoyment. These exercises are used in the first and second years. They are found to be

helpful in overcoming timidity and in forming habits of freedom of expression and ease of bearing and correct position.

The third method of teaching oral English in our school is by means of oral themes. These may be of almost any sort practicable for written composition. For convenience and as a means of emphasis, we divide this work into four parts, according to the four forms of composition. In the first year simple narration of personal incidents is used. These are often varied by having reports of conversations overheard on the street or in the lunch hall; again, by having the reproduction of stories, tales of adventure, or fables—for instance, a chapter from *Ivanhoe*, from *Treasure Island*, from Hawthorne's tales, ballads, etc. The second form of composition used in the first year is exposition, made as simple and personal as possible by having such subjects as, "How I Made a Kite," "How I Taught Fido to Beg," etc. Throughout the first year little criticism is given, except by way of insistence upon correct grammar, distinct enunciation, and erect position, the main object being to inculcate the habit of free and simple yet effective expression of ideas.

In the second year our efforts are redoubled, emphasizing narration, description, and exposition. The boys are now over much of their timidity and speak with more freedom and ease. Consequently we can expect more of them and we require longer efforts. We now give more detailed requirements in technique. For instance, at each period we emphasize a different detail. Some of these details are the following: position, tone projection, grammar, unity, coherence, emphasis, suspense and climax, clearness. Here are a few of the topics used during the past year: "Trouble with Our Boat," "Our Organ-Grinder," "The Funniest Man I Ever Saw," "What Happened in the Yard Today," "How I Learned to Ride a Wheel," "How to Make a Baseball Field."

In the third year all four forms of composition are used, but the emphasis is placed upon description and argument. The boys are now allowed to select their own subjects oftener, for their experiences are becoming wider, their judgments more to be depended upon. We now encourage the use of the newspaper

and magazines in gathering material. But here, as throughout the course, the premium is placed upon absolutely original work, work which is gotten from actual experiences and that which has an intimate relation to actual life. For instance, a few of the topics used during the past winter are as follows: "The Clean City Crusade," "Election Frauds," "Types of the Baltimore City College Student," "The Commission Form of Government," "The Smoke Nuisance," "Public Health in Baltimore," "Inter-scholastic v. Interclass Contests in Athletics," "The City College Should Publish a Monthly Paper."

In point of structure the emphasis is now placed upon rhetorical principles and the development and the delivery of a live and interesting speech. We now begin to criticize severely. At first this criticism is done entirely by the teacher; later the boys are encouraged to criticize one another in a frank but good-natured way. Often the office of critic is distributed among the various members of the class. The class is divided into sections, each section being responsible for a particular thing—one for bearing, another for enunciation, still another for grammar, etc. Criticisms are made as soon after the recitation as convenient—sometimes after each speech. Again, to expedite the work in a large class, the final ten minutes of the period is reserved for a clearing of all mistakes and criticisms. In such case the students who act as critics are given credit for their work and are in turn criticized by the teacher. In this year increased attention is given to debating. After a study of argument and much practice in the making of briefs, the oral work is given over to debating for a month or more, culminating in a formal debate, the debaters being selected from those who have done the best work in the informal debating. Also in this year we give more technique in structure of the speech, in delivery, and in bearing.

In the fourth year we use the same methods with enlarged and intensified treatment, as a matter of reviewing and drilling, in order to thoroughly fix habits of full, free, and effective expression. But we do not stop with reviewing former work. Here we emphasize argument. The distinctly oral work of at least one-half the year is devoted to constant and careful drilling upon argument. Burke's

Speech on Conciliation, of course, serves as the basis for the technical knowledge and inspiration. Again, up-to-date and live topics are used, such as deal with current news, local and national politics, school policies and conditions, etc. These exercises lead up to debates, which are of frequent occurrence. At first only such subjects as are within the range of the boys' information and experience are used. Subjects can always be found which the boys will discuss for the sake of interest rather than for the sake of argument. When a boy has something of his own to say, there is an admirable chance for profitable instruction in public speaking. And it is here that we have our best work. Debating is a kind of *game* and has much in common with baseball and football. It is a most valuable instrument and one which we cannot afford to ignore. Not merely is it an admirable means of teaching expression and an aid in developing language, but it contributes directly toward the highest type of citizenship. It teaches the boy to refrain from basing his judgments upon ignorance; it helps him to sound the depth or the shallowness of his own knowledge and to discriminate between the value of things, and thereby to reach the main issue of a question; and finally, it leads him to respect the opinions of others.

As to the matter of method in this form of oral English, the following we have found to work well. A brief, suitable for a three- or five-minute speech, is called for upon a certain day. These briefs are examined and returned with criticisms and suggestions for development. This prevents careless and slovenly work and insures preparation. Several days later the speeches are delivered, the members of the class acting as judges. The four—or in some cases six—members delivering the best speeches constitute the team for the next formal debate. There are three or four formal debates during the year, the final one being a contest between two sections of the same class or between two different classes. The students enter eagerly into these debates and need little spurring to induce them to put forth their best efforts. However, interest is often heightened by having the principal or a visitor act as judge. At the close of the period the teacher criticizes the work in detail. Usually each member of the class is

required to write out his criticism from notes taken during the debate.

A fifth means of giving practice in oral English is our method of dealing with supplementary reading. Each boy is required to read at least six books during the year. Six periods during the year are devoted to book reviews, when each boy is required to speak about his book. The nature of the speech is determined by one of six different points of view—setting, plot, characters, purpose of the author, background, incidents. This period, among the students of the higher classes particularly, is regarded as one of the most interesting periods of the month.

Thus we have seen that oral English at the City College includes five special subjects, but our efforts do not stop there. Oral English with us is a point of view rather than a particular subject. It is our intention and our effort to make it permeate all our work, determining our method of treatment of many literature texts; being used, here, to lend variety to otherwise monotonous work, there, to interest or awaken a mentally sleepy class or pupil; again, to correlate the work with written composition and with literature; and finally, to co-operate with all teachers who believe that good English should be *habitual* rather than occasional.

A few miscellaneous considerations concerning our work in oral English may be helpful. We have found that, in order to avoid waste of effort, it is necessary for the teacher to keep a record of the work of each student, noting a few faults and failings, at each recitation. This need not be a burden to the teacher—in fact, all of it may just as well be done by a member of the class. This gives the teacher the very decided advantage of having a permanent record of the improvement of each student. With a very little ingenuity, any teacher or pupil can arrange a simple yet effective scheme of criticism in any ordinary notebook.

Another device which may add interest to the work is to have contests in oral discussion. This has been successfully tried in Lake Forest College. We are planning to have contests next year of a similar nature. A list of topics, based upon high-school studies and high-school interests, will be submitted to the students several hours before the contest begins. The boys will have an

opportunity to think over the topic which they will select but will not be permitted to consult books nor to talk to instructors. The contestants will be chosen from among those who have the highest grades for oral work in class. This contest may well serve as the climax to a year's work and prizes may be offered to the winners.

The results of our work in oral English are evident and most encouraging. We have found that our boys express themselves more freely and correctly, not merely in the English room but in all departments of their school work and in ordinary conversation. During the past year, men in other departments, not knowing of our work, have commented upon the general improvement in expression. Then, too, this work has vitalized the entire English course and more interest is being taken in the subject of English. The boys regard the present course in English as more practical and useful than the old one. At the close of a year's work I asked a class of thirty Seniors to write a paper, frankly and freely criticizing the present course in English. Twenty boys made special mention of the oral features of the year's work, many of them expressing themselves as having gotten more real benefit from the oral than from any other part of the work. No one criticized the oral work unfavorably. In brief, we have found that oral English stimulates thought, producing sound thinking; that it enhances literary appreciation; that it arouses interest and awakens the inert; that it tends to give confidence in one's own power of expression, and that it inculcates and fixes the habit of clear, correct, straightforward, and effective expression of one's own thoughts and feelings.

Just a word more in answer to several objections which may be made to this work. Someone may say that it all sounds good, but how can we find time for the extra work? In answer to this objection let me remind you that nearly every feature of this plan correlates with other work, that in nearly every case we are "killing two birds with one stone," that we are not adding a new subject to our already overcrowded curriculum, but rather that we are changing the emphasis and vitalizing our work, making it contribute to utilitarian as well as to cultural aims in education. Of course we should have more time for English work, but

if we do not have it, let us make the best possible use of what we have.

On describing our course to a friend, I was not surprised to hear this comment: "You are trying to cram a mountain into a pail." Such may be the case, but let us not find fault with the mountain; let us be thankful for the *pail*—we may get a *barrel* by and by.

Again, many may think that this work calls for a special teacher of elocution. Not at all. The teacher must be enthusiastic and thoroughly alive, of course. Technical training is helpful and necessary to the highest success in this as in any art, but much good can be done by the earnest and enthusiastic teacher.

In conclusion, allow me to express the hope and the belief that within a few years the emphasis in the teaching of English will be completely changed and that college-entrance requirements will call for reasonable proficiency in *oral* expression.